DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 536 CS 215 445

AUTHOR Crimmel, Hal
TITLE Prudes and Conservatives; or, Everybody Does It but Literature Teachers: Creative Writing Assignments.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Writing; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Introductory Courses; *Literary Criticism; Literature Appreciation; *Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Composition Literature Relationship; Controversy; *State University of New York Albany

ABSTRACT

At the State University of New York at Albany, a controversy arose over what type of writing assignment is appropriate in introductory literature classes, particularly those taught by graduate students. Undergraduates applying for the honors division were unable to produce even one literary criticism essay despite 9 hours of literature courses taken. The assumption was that creative writing assignments serve a lesser purpose and require less in the way of critical analysis. If in fact the "lit-crit" paper is superior to the creative paper, what is it that it possesses? "The Norton Introduction to Literature" asks students to cite evidence and "so forth" in their literary criticism essays, to consider tone, "thesis" and "central thrust." Excerpts from a model lit crit essay the Norton provides share many virtues with excerpts from a creative literary essay written by a student. Each seems aware of focus, organization and central thrust. It is hard not to wonder, however, whether constructed defenses of the creative approach such as this are honest. Perhaps the real reason an instructor chooses a certain approach is because he/she likes it. Could it be that there is something disingenuous about claiming a certain critical approach is more "accurate," more "responsible," more "scholarly," or more "intellectual." Are these words not smoke screens for the instructor's desires? Admitting the genres have much in common might be a way to compromise. (Contains 13 references.) (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 399 536

Prudes and Conservatives; or, Everybody Does It But Literature Teachers: Creative Writing Assignments

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

H Crimmel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Hal Crimmel
University at Albany

CS 215745

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

It's evening now, the time when one's thoughts turn from work to play; from professional relationships to romance; from matters of the mind to those of the heart. I guess in a sense I am here to talk to you about matters of the heart, about gut-level feelings, heartfelt feelings, pangs of desire -- whatever it is that we call emotions which we do not wish to reduce to --or cannot reduce to-- a formal rhetorical construct. As we all know decisions made in the heat of passion can disturb us in more reflective moments. And emotion, however immediately gratifying, can land us in trouble later on down the road. Lest windows and eyeglasses become steamy with the stirrings of heavy breathing, at this point, let me make myself clear. I'm here to talk about the question of creative writing assignments in literature classrooms and what happens when we simply include them because we want to.

The desire I speak of is *my* urge to incorporate creative writing assignments in literature courses. If there is a lesson in my modest tale of desire, it is a confusing one, for a year later I'm still scratching around for an answer. The tale begins with my desire (and apparently that of other teachers) which suddenly collided with the needs of others, resulting in a memo circulated in our English department at the University of Albany by a faculty member concerned about the supposed neglect of the argumentative academic prose essay. The memo itself seemed inspired by the notion that T.A.'s and others --but mostly T.A.'s-- were in some fashion neglecting their obligations to students and the department by not teaching the "right stuff" in their introductory level literature classrooms.

At Albany where I teach literature and writing classes along with a dozen or more other T.A.'s, we have the opportunity to develop, design, and teach our own courses. Unlike the situation at many other institutions, where T.A.'s are given a reading list, a syllabus, and shown the door, or where they act as readers and graders for courses taught by permanent faculty members, we have significant ideological

and pedagogical latitude. (A recipe for trouble, you say?) Maybe so. But most, if not all of us, take our teaching responsibilities seriously while we seek to explore the seams and intersections of the discipline. Those of us taking the graduate program's commitment to its motto of sorts --the "nexus of discourse"-- at face value have found ourselves regarded suspiciously by a sizable cadre of faculty members. Somewhat ironically, these intellectual McCarthyites have little, if nothing, to do with the design and operation of the graduate program, and in fact teach exclusively in the undergraduate program. It is from this wing of the faculty and from the person whose memo I will now read you, who have a significant, shall we say, problem, with alternative forms of written discourse being submitted for credit in our classes. Part of the memo reads thus:

> Most [undergraduate] students have taken three or more literature courses, usually in English. Yet recurrently, and increasingly, I am told that they have never, that's never, been required or asked to write a "literary-critical" essay. [...] They are writing personal experience narratives, poems (usually personal), fiction, etc. (Dorfman 1)

The crisis of sorts which prompted this memo was written by the director of the undergraduate English Honors program who expressed her concern with the dearth of lit-crit papers produced in lower level English classes. The problem, in her opinion, lay in that the students applying to the Honors program did not have any lit-crit papers of this sort to submit with the application as the required writing sample. The person continues in her memo:

> How is it possible that students with nine credits of English courses required for the major, have no practical training in using the language of literary criticism, in textual evidence, and so forth (Dorfman 1)?

To many of us at whom the memo was "indirectly" directed, the sentiment expressed by her was rather puzzling, in part because we felt her characterization was exaggerated, but also in part because we felt that our classrooms did provide "practical training" in using "textual evidence" and "so forth." But of course she is not alone in her explicit and implicit privileging of the lit-crit paper, because it is shared by many teachers of literature all over the country. Though Ann Berthoff, among others, has made the case that all writing is creative, the fact remains that most English Studies professionals acknowledge on some level the distinction between creative writing and the "argumentative academic prose essay." The distinction between lit-crit papers and creative writing often results in a tension giving shape to a debate which in the past has situated itself within the tradition some might refer to as "expressivist." It has recently appeared in a slightly altered form in the Bartholamae-Elbow debate over alternative forms of discourse printed in the pages of *College Composition and Communication.*

The conflict at Albany was simply a localized manifestation of the debate. And though the boundary between these two genres seems to have been breached in composition classrooms, it is still present in literature classrooms. I feel puzzled by the maintenance of this distinction, because the perceived distinctions between creative writing --in this instance, fiction, and academic writing, in the shape of the literary-critical essay-- seem so small, that there appear to be few *good* reasons to maintain it, aside from personal desire.

If the lit-crit paper is superior to the creative paper, what is it, then, that all these teachers think a lit-crit paper possesses? In the memo I cited earlier, "textual evidence, and so forth" are considered desirable features of such a paper. I am going to use *The Norton Introduction to Literature* to take a stab at quickly answering what "and so forth" might refer to. The Norton asks students to consider a number of criteria such as *Tone* and *Use of Evidence* when working on their papers,

assuming that these qualities will be the ones for which their teacher is looking. The Norton also asks students to consider

> *Thesis and central thrust*: Is it clear what your main point is?; *Organization*: Does your paper move logically from beginning to end?; (1428-1429).

Reflecting a few of these criteria is a lit-crit essay advanced by the editors of the *Norton* as a model of the genre. It is entitled, "The Struggle to Surface in the Water of "Sonny's Blues," by Geoffrey Clement, and I'd like to read you part of it:

> In "Sonny's Blues," James Baldwin employs water as a symbol that enables him to concentrate more clearly on the lack of and the crucial need for a real sense of communication among members of society. As Baldwin captures the intensity of Sonny's and his brother's struggles to understand their situation, he vividly depicts a society that seeks to swallow up the souls of its inhabitants and gradually to drown them spiritually. Thus, Baldwin illustrates quite clearly his sense of the hopelessness in man's plight. In portraying the struggle of street life in Harlem, he uses water in its opposite forms—frozen water and boiling water— and toward the end of the story, as Sonny's and his brother's revelations help to resolve the conflict, the water becomes calm.

You've all read a number of similar essays, so I don't think it necessary to read this through to the end. You get the idea. But I wish to include a little more of the next student text, which was written to fulfill an assignment for a 200-level literature elective I taught last year. This student, sophomore Elida Martes, chose to produce a "creative" text, which engaged Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. She inserts the character John Yossarian from the novel, into Albany campus life, in order to capture Yossarian's erratic yet calculating personality. In its redaction of the hospital scenes and of his obsession with women, I think Ms. Martes' story offers a sharp commentary on the novel.

> Upon entering 1995 I vowed to keep a journal but I've failed for almost four months already. This journal was partly suggested by Dr.Wrinkles, and part of my own effort to keep my head attached to my body. Today is the day before Valentine's Day, the most ridiculous

holiday ever invented. It's kind of inane, if you think about the drama it induces. When you are a kid, it makes you shy and unwilling to go to school for fear that the person you are obsessed with will pass you over like old cheese --- OR --- the person you've been dreading (who watches you so closely in study hall that everybody knows and who happens to be 300 pds) pitifully haunts you the whole cupid and heart mangled day and finally works up scarcely enough nerve to stutter some foolishness in your face and loose whatever little respect you had for the individual in the first place.

This is the case through high school accordingly with some variation. (...)

Trudy

Picture it, three years from this very day--- Yours truly, John Yossarian, the skinniest freshman with the biggest feet residing on Dutch Quad (and damn proud of it -- for we all know what they say about men with big feet!). I just wish it was true or at least that the blonde or the brunette living directly upstairs from my dorm room believed it. Scratch that, I don't need them to believe it necessarily, I just want them to wonder about it.

The blonde, Trudy, used to visit me at the infirmary that February. She became quite interested in my condition, and I in hers. I had a bad case of midterms which I hoped would carry me through finals. Midterms were.... too massive to study for yet too minor to cheat on. I convinced Dr. Wrinkles, through a temperature of 101 degrees, to excuse me from midterms until my fever subsided. If I calculated this correctly my temperature would go down at the dawn of spring break. Though he did not agree that I had pneumonia, he could not allow the stress of finals to worsen my health. [...] He could have also been overruled by the infirmary's administrator, who was a short hairy surgeon-- she had the final say. [...]

Trudy used to take waffles and strawberries from Dutch Quad cafeteria and brought them to me in the infirmary. She would feed me the fruit and I would close my eyes and pretend I was licking them off of her knees. She had sharp, thin knees, very sexy for a girl of eighteen. I hated to hear Trudy talk though, -- She had the hardest Italian, Bensonhurst, lasagna, and red wine accent I had ever heard.

She also had that Italian smell! Hmmm ... A strong cross between salami, cheap wallpaper, and garlic. Needless to say she attracted me most on the days I skipped lunch---- An attraction which bordered on nausea, all the same it was fun to watch her squirm while I cracked her knuckles. [...]

I liked Trudy's innocence, she made me feel like Indiana Jones. Just so you understand, she and I have never gone beyond French kissing and fondling. Trudy told me one day over apples and waffles that she

had sex about fifty times but she never experienced an orgasm. Can you imagine? That's like eating cheesecake without tastebuds! It's like a deaf person listening to a walkman.

At the time, I didn't have any real feelings for Trudy--but she presented me with a challenge! It was my destiny to conquer her one day and give her an orgasm. I was in no particular rush, you see, the longer the battle -- the sweeter the victory.

Dominique

It was never my intention to use Trudy but, she was so, so ... usable. At first I used her for company and she used me for the identical purpose, so we basically cancelled out uses.

Her roommate, mmmm! Now she was worth using someone for. She was tall and busty-- bringing to mind pictures of Marylin Monroe, except brunette. Blondes are overated anyway. Dominique... Shit! Even her name demanded adoration. She sometimes braided her hair like Bo Derrick, didn't have a butterfly on her body, and paid me no more attention than she did the janitor! Correction, She winked at the janitor and she winced at me.

'Hey, Doc Wrinkles-- can't you give me something to make my body catch up to my feet?' I pleaded.

She would notice me sooner or later. I dare say it would be sooner if I hid in her bathroom, butt naked with "Dominique" painted on my aspirations.

'Why don't you ask her to be your valentine, tomorrow is Valentine's you know. It sounds corny but maybe she's waiting for you to make the first move,' suggested the good Doc.

Any thing would have been worth trying at this point, I hung out with Trudy so much people began to crave salami sandwiches when they got near me.

To make a tall tale short, Dominique figured herself too good for me. Maybe she was haughty, maybe I was a loser. Although she had eyes deep as Africa and an A+ figure-- she wasn't enough for me to drive myself insane-- but she was pretty close to it; for I was already insane.

Plainly and simply I was bordering on the loss of all my marbles. All of this being the case I endured all of Dominique's conceited rejections and I spent that summer in Bensonhurst. I found out that good lasagna and cheap wallpaper make for a fantastic pair and red wine makes me tipsy.

I must end here, my stomach is growling and Trudy is calling me to lunch (her accent still annoys me). We're having salami and garlic sandwiches.

I don't need to beat you over the head with a blow by blow description of the ways in which these terms like *Thesis and Central Thrust.*, or *Organization,* when applied to these respective texts, mean very little out of context. . . . But I'm going to do it anyway, if only for a moment, to illustrate how superficial these criteria essentially are. For instance in the essay on "Sonny's Blues," the student demonstrates an understanding of the idea of *Thesis and Central Thrust,* writing, "In "Sonny's Blues," James Baldwin employs water as a symbol that enables him to concentrate more clearly on the lack of and the crucial need for a real sense of communication among members of society" (1434). Here he rather explicitly defines the focus of the paper -- a discussion of Baldwin's use of water as a symbol. In the creative piece, my student's use of examples is indicative of the paper's adherence to a "central thrust" which bears itself out in the composite portrait of Yossarian as a highly sexed, opportunistic individual, with a flair for working an oppressive system to his advantage. Under the heading *Organization,* the Clements essay deals in each paragraph with either with the theme of water as symbol, or the ways in which individuals do not communicate with each other. In Elida Martes paper, organization appears in her progression from Yossarian's problems with attracting suitable females, to his eventual resolution of sorts, when he finds love with the salami-smelling valentine right under his nose.

Granted, I am choosing not to complicate the criteria, but then, does the Norton complicate them? The authors seem to be asking simply if the text means what it says, assuming we all know what this means. And we do, in context --or at least we agree to accept what it means. But when agreement fails, then understanding seems to slip away too, and when it does we have a hard time talking about what it is these respective texts actually "do." When we do pit one genre against another, it avoids what I see to be the central conflict, which is desire. Because it seems to me that much of what we advance as a rational, logical argument for the inclusion or

exclusion of one genre or the other is a substitute for personal preference that bears the institutional seal of approval.

I could make a number of arguments why creative writing should be included in literature classrooms. Creative texts *can* produce criticism that engages literature without sacrificing the qualities of a 'critical' text that literature teachers hold so dear, if the reader is willing to look for them. And if the reader is not, then it seems important to ask what Anthony Petrosky calls "questions of readers' expectations" (217). If our expectations are formulated so that we cannot find qualities of lit-crit papers in fiction, then perhaps literature teachers should rethink their expectations when reading student fiction done for writing assignments. If we are willing to admit that on a visceral level of understanding the distinction between what the two genres actually do is nebulous, it seems unnecessary to maintain such a fortified border between these genres and their application in literature classrooms.

Certainly there are those who could argue the converse. But when all is said and done, I wonder if my desire is the most honest explanation. If I fail to say "I like to do it and my students like to do it," I am failing to admit one of the main motivations for including these assignments in my classroom. And if it were not for the fact that English departments were not continually required to defend themselves and their critical practices to one another and to university administrators, wouldn't this be enough? Are we being honest with ourselves in claiming that using a certain critical practice is more "accurate," more "responsible," more "scholarly," more "intellectual," or are these words and their defenses mere smokescreens for our desires, which were we to bare them to public view, would appear as nothing more than that? Or do these arguments simply give us something to talk about?

I suspect such pie is too humble to eat for a profession which imagines itself to be above such motivations, and pretends to overlook the personal nature of the petty

battles fought every day right before their eyes, outside their office doors, in departmental mailrooms and committee meetings. If this is not true, why, I ask, doesn't our honors program director simply change the submissions criteria for the program? Is it because she feels that it is too difficult to compare the two genres against one another? Doesn't want to change? Believes in the invincible superiority of the lit-crit essay to express "truths" about a text?

In either version of the resolution as posited in an either-or scenario, something is lost -- and that overriding something is frequently personal. No one wants to lose face. But perhaps in the acknowledgment of the fact that these genres have a great deal in common, admitting the validity of the creative assignments need not be a humiliation-soaked compromise, thus permitting the co-existence of desires that have been constructed as mutually exclusive.

Works Cited

Bartholomae, David. "Writing With Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow." CCC 46 (1995): 62-71).

Clement, Geoffrey. "The Struggle to Surface in the Water of "Sonny's Blues," in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, Shorter Fifth Edition Eds. Bain, Beaty, Hunter. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1991.

Dorfman, Deborah. Memo to "Martha Rozett, Randy Craig and All Interested and Relevant Faculty and Graduate Students" April 18, 1994 (*sic*).

Martes, Elida Unpublished fiction. Submitted for English 226Q, Spring semester 1995.

Petrosky, Anthony. "Imagining the Past and Teaching Essay and Poetry Writing." *Encountering Student Texts: Interpretive Issues in Reading Student Writing*. Ed. Bruce Lawson, Susan Sterr Ryan, and W. Ross Winterowd. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989. 199-220.

The Norton Introduction to Literature, Shorter Fifth Edition Eds. Bain, Beaty, Hunter. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1991.

Works Consulted

Bishop, Wendy. "Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and Composing Creative Writing." *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*. eds. Bishop and Ostrom. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994. 181-197.

Bridwell-Bowles, Lillian. "Freedom, Form, Function: Varieties of Academic Discourse." CCC 46 (1995): 46-61.

Elbow, Peter. "Forward: About Personal Expressive Academic Writing" *Pre-Text* 11 (Spring-Summer 1990): 7-11.

Kirscht, Judy, Rhonda Levine, and John Reiff. "Evolving Paradigms: WAC and the

Masiello, Lea "Voices from the Writing Center: It's Okay to Be Creative--A Role for the Imagination in Basic Writing Courses." *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*. eds. Bishop and Ostrom. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994. 208-216

North, Steven and Lori Anderson, Barbara Chepaitis, David Coogan, Lale Davidson, Ron Maclean, Cindy Parrish, Jonathan Post, Beth Weatherby, and Amy Schoch. "The Role of Writing in English Graduate Education and SUNY Albany's "Nexus of Discourses." Draft of unpublished manuscript. February 1995.

Schwartz, Mimi. "Wearing the Shoe on the Other Foot: Teacher as Student Writer," "Staffroom Interchange," *CCC* 40 (1989): 203-210.